

# **Linguistic Diversity, Official Language Choice and Nation Building: Theory and Evidence**

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## **Abstract**

This paper re-examines the link between higher levels of ethno-linguistic fractionalization (ELF) and worse socioeconomic outcomes and shows how it is mediated by language choice. Focusing on the post-colonial world, we provide a theoretical framework that shows as the linguistic distance between indigenous languages increases, the payoffs from using any indigenous group's language decreases, and hence the probability of retaining the status quo (the colonial language) increases. Due to high linguistic distance from, and low exposure to, the colonial language, reliance on it augments the costs of human and social capital. We test our ideas using data from sub-Saharan Africa and in support of our theory find that linguistically diverse nations are more likely to use colonial languages in education. Using a combination of methods - case study, observational data and a natural experiment exploiting the partitioning of ethnicities across national boundaries on the eve of African independence - we show the use of a proximate language as the language of schooling has a large positive effect on literacy and educational advance. Finally, replicating a well-regarded study on artificial states and nation building, we show that a good portion of the effect of ELF on "Africa's growth tragedy" is mediated by the implications of language choice.

## **Speaker Profile**

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